OPINION

BY HUMA YUSUF

Balancing act

IRAN'S revolution seems deferred — for now. But, as the poet said, the centre cannot hold. It is thus time to ask what the possible collapse of the regime there would mean for Pakistan. Developments in Iran have always had domestic ripple effects. The countries' trajectories have been entwined since Iran became the first country to recognise Pakistan in 1947. The neighbours have over the decades banded together — for example, during the 1965 and 1971 wars — but also squabbled, as seen in the recent tit-for-tat targeting of armed groups in 2024.

Any change in Iran's ruling dispensation would affect Pakistan. This may not be an immediate prospect given the shocking violence meted out against protesters in recent days, reportedly leaving thousands dead. Writing in *Time* magazine, Narges Bajoghli points out that at this moment, the ingredients for another Iranian revolution do not quite add up.

In 1979, the Iranian people, the clergy, and the 'bazaar', united, with the support of several key military factions. That unity is elusive right now: there are reported tensions among the clerical authorities, the merchant class is now integrated with and dependent on the regime; and the security forces are still willing to open fire on the people.

But this will not be the case indefinitely. The warning signs are there: Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is 86 and has no clear successor; the regime's credibility with the Iranian people is heavily eroded as apparent in successive uprisings; the government has few tools with which to alleviate the economic crisis in the country, and its regional influence is severely diminished following the rout of allied groups in recent times.

In this scenario, Pakistan's short-term concerns would be linked to the security situation in Balochistan, as political instability across the border would create more space for Baloch separatist and jihadi groups to operate, leading to a wider uptick in terrorism. Pakistan would also fret over the $2 billion-plus in jeopardised bilateral trade, not including the informal trade in fuel and electricity, which drives economic activity in our southern and western provinces.

But in the longer term, Pakistan would have to pull off a geopolitical juggling act, starting with managing ties with the US. Recent events have made clear that Washington will punish (through sanctions or tariffs) those who support the Iranian regime much further, and will vocally back opposition to the regime, despite the fact that such support would position the opposition as a stooge of Western imperialism, and US and Israeli interests in particular. Islamabad would find itself needing to balance support for America's desired outcomes in Iran with its links to pro-Tehran elements, as well as managing domestic sentiment against Western interventionism.

Any celebration of the regime's downfall by official elements in Pakistan or even perceived support for American puppeteering, would risk fuelling sectarian tensions within Pakistan and across the region. This became apparent during the Iran-Israel war last year, when some pro-Iran Shia leaders warned of repercussions if the regime were forcibly displaced.

Both these concerns — resentment against Western meddling and pro-Iran Shia mobilisation — would be particularly acute in the event that an opposition fronted by former Iranian crown prince Reza Pahlavi succeeds the regime. This is because Pahlavi is widely perceived as US-backed and Israel linked. For Pakistan, Pahlavi carries the additional challenge of being pro-India — he has called for improved Tehran-Delhi ties, and is a proponent of more Indian investment in Iran. It is not inconceivable that he would look the other way while India stokes Baloch separatism via Sistan-Baluchestan. Constructive engagement with him may have to become a priority for Islamabad.

> Pakistan will be affected by any change in Iran's ruling set-up.

The other key challenge for Pakistan would manifest in its relations with Gulf countries and Turkiye as they respond to the exit of the regime. A regional tussle over political influence within Iran and Iranian offshore wealth, as well as a race to fill the regional power vacuum left behind by the regime would be likely.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman and Turkiye would all join the fray, potentially at loggerheads. Saudi Arabia and Turkiye, which would vie for political dominance in Syria, Iraq and Kurdish regions, are likely beneficiaries, which given their alliances with Pakistan would be a net positive. But intra-Gulf power games within Iran would leave Islamabad in an awkward position. For good or bad, this is not a new conundrum for Islamabad in the context of its relations with Tehran. Let's hope the foreign policymakers are heeding the signs, and preparing for the imminent balancing act. ■

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BY NEDA MULJI

Evolving needs

AT a recent conference, an interesting question arose regarding the differences in the needs of students in rural and urban areas. Perhaps the biggest challenge faced by teachers in our rural and urban classrooms is limited individual attention resulting from large classes. The problem is compounded by mixed ability (and mixed age groups in rural classrooms). Not many teachers have access to training that helps them navigate these challenges.

Another equally big challenge is implementing strategies to make a significant departure from teacher-led classrooms based on lecture methods. Teachers in both rural and urban areas have struggled to make the shift towards more student-centred approaches such as inquiry-based lessons with hands-on work. Keeping students engaged is a struggle for teachers in both urban and rural areas. Distractions are rampant and teacher expertise is put to the test when students do not show commitment towards academic achievement.

Both rural and urban teachers address students who struggle with the language of instruction — usually compounded by the teachers' own lack of expertise in it. The language of instruction becomes a big enough barrier to completing the curriculum and achieving the desired results, and often causes teacher burnout. A fallout with the management usually follows. The ripple effect of unaddressed challenges, misalignment with teachers' professional development needs and the massive curriculum workload are common culprits inhibiting teachers' progress. With disgruntled teachers wading through realms of text to make it to the end of term, many students fall through the cracks.

Professional development programmes that align management and teachers' goals can help both rural and urban teachers. This is especially important as most schools 'teach to the test' and the pressure for academic results grows each year. Consequently, professional development programmes stress result-oriented teaching.

Most professional development programmes focus on urgent priorities such as student learning outcomes, lesson planning and teaching approaches, while teacher and student well-being remains on the back-burner. Many teachers struggle with social emotional challenges, having to juggle work and family, and lack avenues for guidance. The oxygen-mask theory is not new. Teachers need to cater to their own well-being first to be equipped to support their students.

Teacher well-being is particularly under threat in a world where technology is evolving at a dizzying pace, where digital skills are high in demand, and information overload is burying motivation. Social emotional well-being training is paramount for teachers to meet the demands of students' evolving needs through their own resilience and adaptability to the environment. While it is true that 'students have changed' in many ways, it is futile to lament that change. As this change is impacting teachers worldwide — and is agnostic to the rural-urban divide —growth and progress lie in devising innovative ways to navigate the unfolding challenges.

Digital literacy is not just an option; it is a need. Besides teaching students how to use online tools responsibly, teachers now have to cultivate students' resilience through massive workloads and conflicting schedules. Through these demands, they are also required to keep a close eye on personalised learning so that no student is left behind.

As the needs of students expand to include goals that are beyond immediate curriculum requirements, it is not just teaching that needs to be reassessed but also the relevance of the curriculum. If the curriculum is aligned closely with real-life application, practical skills and technological expertise, our students will find themselves better equipped to use their learning to develop future readiness. Without this focus on future skills, it is not entirely clear what the teaching and learning goals are designed for.

> Many students end up with a vacuum in skills.

Many students, regardless of their geographical or economic background, step out of schools and colleges with a vacuum in skills, scrambling to meet the demands of a cut-throat world where they sink or swim depending on the opportunities they are fortunate enough to come by. Not all firms provide on-the-job training; in fact, fresh graduates are expected to deliver from the get-go as they step into the professional world.

Their need for direction often remains unmet as most school systems thrive on one-size-fits-all frameworks that don't often manage to provide personalised skill development, nor do they have monitoring frameworks to keep a tab on progress. It is time to allow our students' changing needs to lead educational strategy, not the other way around. ■

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FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1976 | Fifty years ago

17 MAF water wasted

KARACHI: At least 17 MAF ... of water is going waste at present in Pakistan because of defective or poorly maintained watercourses, spillage, excessive watering, or other misuses, studies show. This is nearly five times the quantity of water to be made available for irrigation purposes from the giant Tarbela Dam and almost one-sixth of the water being carried by the network of canals in the country. Studies also show that because of the failure of the land-owners to maintain the water-courses properly and efficiently about one-fourth quantity is lost between the head regulator and the farm outlets.

[Meanwhile, as reported by a correspondent in Karachi,]with over 2,000 deaths and over 10,000 injury cases during the last five years Karachi has been turned into a highly accident prone City. A significant number of these deaths can be attributed to the inadequacy of timely medical aid because of delayed transportation of victims to hospitals and the complex ... medico-legal formalities. While the menace of road accidents continues to harass the citizens, the ... reaction of the concerned agencies seems no more than casual.

1951 | Seventy-five years ago

Anti-Eisenhower riots

ROME: Two persons have been killed and 84 injured since yesterday [Jan 18] in different parts of Italy by police firing on demonstrators protesting against the arrival here of General Eisenhower for talks with Government leaders regarding the formation of an Atlantic Pact army. Rome tonight was in a state of siege with thousands of policemen posted on balconies and rooftops guarding the routes to be followed by the General.

Italy's biggest-ever protest storm sprang up last night with the arrival of the General in Rome when the Communist and Socialist leaders called for ... demonstrations throughout the country to present "the most resolute and fierce opposition to the Atlantic army, which could make Italy the Korea of Europe".

In the Northern industrial area known at the "Red belt" sporadic strikes held big factories and public services in jitters. The strikes latter turned into gun-battles between workers and police. Strongest security measures since the war are now in force. Armed police in scarlet riot jeeps with screaming sirens are trying to break up demonstrations throughout Italy. In Rome itself all strategic points are being heavily guarded. — News agencies

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.

State-backed Indian terrorism in IOK

WITH well over half-a-million troops on the ground, the India-occupied Kashmir is practically a colony of India. The valley is a disputed state as per United Nations resolutions, but India regards Kashmiris as 'terrorists'. The fact is that India has been practicing state-sponsored terrorism in occupied Kashmir, while it has been stoking terrorism in several countries.

Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) officer Bahukutumbi Raman, in his book *The Kaoboys of R&AW: Down Memory Lane* makes no bones about India's involvement up to the level of prime minister in East Pakistan's insurgency. Raman reminds the reader that Indian parliament had passed a resolution on March 31, 1971, in support of insurgency. Indira Gandhi had then confided with spymaster Rameshwar Nath Kao that in case Mujibur Rehman was prevented from ruling Pakistan, she would 'liberate' East Pakistan from the clutches of the junta.

Amar Bhushan in his book *Terror in Islamabad* reveals how he brazenly violated norms of diplomatic immunity to complete his missions. Bhushan happened to have served as a diplomat at the Indian High Commission in Islamabad. Before being posted to Islamabad, Bhushan had served as an intelligence officer at RAW and Border Security Force (BSF), among other such assignments, for a quarter of a century. His book mentions another RAW officer disguised as a diplomat who was posted in Pakistan.

Former Indian ambassador Bharath Raj Muthu Kumar, with the consent of Jaswant Singh, the then foreign minister, secretly coordinated military and medical assistance to the Northern Alliance, while India established a 'Free Balochistan' office in New Delhi under Naila Baloch. The inauguration was attended by many Indian intelligence officers.

India's policy on Kashmir has been in a flux. On Nov 2, 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru declared in a radio broadcast that the Indian government was "prepared when peace and order have been established in Kashmir, to have a referendum held under international auspices like the United Nations". The declassified Nehru Papers speak volumes about shifting Indian stands.

Till about 1953, New Delhi continued to reiterate that Kashmir was a disputed territory, and the Kashmiri people would be provided an opportunity to exercise the right to self-determination. Then India started saying that the UN resolutions on the dispute were of a mediatory nature, not mandatory. India had given a special state status to the disputed territory. It abolished that status and annexed the territory in 2019 in clear violation of the relevant UN Security Council resolutions passed in 1951 and 1957.

India's attempt to equate freedom movement in Kashmir to 'terrorism' is futile. Kashmir is a simmering nuclear tinderbox. By violating UN resolutions, India qualifies to be labelled a rogue state. It should be subjected to sanctions. Besides Kashmir, there are other unresolved disputes, like the annexation of Junagadh, Rann of Kutch and Kargil.

Amjed Jaaved
Rawalpindi

Hopes and fears

WITH 2026 still nascent, we must pause for a quiet reflection. The calendar has turned, but the memories of 2025 remain vivid. The year 2025 was not merely a sequence of days; it was a collection of moments lived with friends, colleagues, and companions of circumstance. The people we worked with, laughed with, struggled alongside, and sometimes even disagreed with have left lasting impressions.

For many, the new year also brings change — new workplaces, new roles, or new paths altogether. And with those changes comes a quiet sense of loss. Offices once familiar, desks once occupied, routines once repeated have now become memories.

The simple conversations, shared tea breaks, and collective efforts will be missed. Time moves forward without mercy. The days that have gone will never return, and this realisation often leaves the human heart in confusion. What remains when everything else changes? What truly endures is character. In the end, people remember not positions or titles, but how they were treated — who cared, who stood by them, who acted with kindness when it mattered most.

The early days of the new year on the world stage are not quite what one might have hoped for. Hope is fragile, but hope is all that we must cling on to. Let us hope that 2026 will be a fantastic year by the time it, too, comes to an end.

Muhammad Faizan Ali
Karachi

Toll tax and students

THE recent decision by the administration of Punjab University in Lahore to install toll plazas at its main gates has caused deep concern among the academic community. For a public-sector university to demand a toll tax from its own students is both unprecedented and unacceptable. The university has a sprawling campus where departments are widely dispersed, and students rely heavily on rickshaws and shuttle services to move around. Rickshaw drivers, unwilling to pay a toll that is not their responsibility, are now shifting the burden onto the students.

It is baffling that those who pay tuition fee and contribute directly to university revenue are being forced to bear an additional financial penalty even though they have every right to enter the campus freely. Charging students, faculty and staff simply to access the institution they belong to reflects a troubling administrative mindset; one that appears more focused on revenue extraction than academic facilitation. The increasing fee hikes in recent months, coupled with this toll tax, raise serious questions about governance in one of the country's leading public-sector universities. Instead of facilitating access and supporting students, the administration seems intent on creating barriers that undermine both affordability and dignity. A government institution should not behave like a private enterprise, let alone one that treats students as a convenient source of income.

The Higher Education Commission (HEC) and all other relevant authorities should take immediate notice. The toll must be withdrawn for all university members. Punjab University must be reminded of its forgotten public mandate to educate, not to impose tolls at its gates.

Afifa Shahid
Lahore

Underage smokers

I RECENTLY saw two children, barely seven or eight years old, asking for cigarettes at a local shop. When questioned, they claimed they were buying them for their family elders. The shopkeeper refused, but later informed me that nearly 15 to 20 children of the same age visit his shop every day with similar demands.

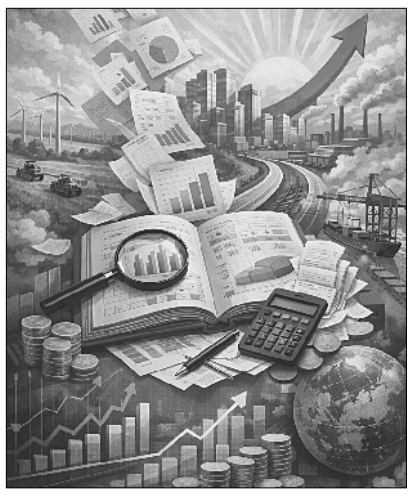
This practice is alarming and dangerous. Allowing children to purchase cigarettes, even on behalf of adults, exposes them to smoking at a very early age, and increases the risk of addiction. The problem worsens when shopkeepers hand over cigarettes without questioning. Parents must closely monitor their children's activities and friendships, while shopkeepers should strictly refuse to sell cigarettes to minors under any circumstances.

More importantly, the authorities must enforce existing laws, and take action against shops that violate age restrictions.

Protecting children from early exposure to smoking is a shared responsibility and should not be ignored any longer.

Shahque
Mashkay

Documented economy



DEVELOPED countries happen to be documented economies. In simple words, income earned by an individual or an organisation by default has a trail through banking channels. Across England, for instance, if you board a bus or train, one has to either pay fare via a travel card or a contact-less bank card. Travel and bank cards are registered in owner's name, and help the government track the movement of money. A shop without a debit or credit card payment facility triggers customer resentment and business suffers.

Taxes are paid religiously to the national exchequer, and, in case of a breach, zero tolerance is manifested. Hefty penalties are slapped and even legal prosecution is not ruled out. The government in Pakistan is taking steps in right direction to document the country's economy. For a couple of years, people may find it hard to cope with this change. Traders and people may protest. It should not mean that efforts should be halted to streamline Pakistan's economy. Battling corruption, tax evasion and influence of all sorts is the only way to put the economy on the right track. Pakistan's sovereignty is linked with its economic strength. And economic strength can only be gained by first putting the house in order.

As an overseas British Pakistani, I see light at the end of the tunnel only if the government and the state put their heads together to rebuild Pakistan's economy, imposing hash penalties on those who are found working against such efforts.

Shahzad Lodhi
London, UK

▶ **DIGITAL ISOLATION:** Whether it is a family dinner, a bustling coffee shop, or a casual lunch with colleagues, one notices a strange phenomenon: a group physically together, but individually captivated by a glowing screen. This increasingly common sight raises a profound question: has the very technology designed to unite us unintentionally cultivated a new, profound form of digital isolation? Social media is making people antisocial as its algorithms force people to spend more time online, leaving behind little time for physical interactions. It also weakens existing relationships due to constant use even when people are physically together.
Yasir Haleem Shaikh
Karachi

▶ **EV BUS STOP:** The EV bus stop located at the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (Pims) has no proper seating or shelter for passengers or staff. The old stop is still being used which is filled with garbage and stagnant water. Sadly, patients and elderly passengers suffer the most because the area is slippery and unhygienic, increasing the risk of untoward incidents. Drivers and fare collectors also have no place to rest, and must stand in the same unhealthy surroundings. The relevant authorities should have the area cleaned, fix the drainage, and provide all basic facilities so that the EV bus service at Pims can work in a proper, safe and organised way.
Muhammad Anfal
Islamabad

▶ **UNACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOUR:** At the Parachinar Sports Complex, some young players wanted to use the indoor basketball court recently due to the bad weather outside. The management, however, not only refused to open it, but also used insulting words to discourage and force the players away. Such behaviour is unacceptable as it discourages the youth from sports. Local and provincial authorities should immediately investigate the incident, hold the administration accountable, and ensure justice for the players. Sports facilities should serve the community, not disrespect it.
Sibt e Ali Turi
Parachinar

External Ombudsman

Veteran journalist Muhammad Ali Siddiqi is *Dawn's* External Ombudsman (DEO). His duty is to attend to our readers' complaints, and to respond to them professionally. DEO is the investigating authority to whom all complaints can be referred, and it is DEO who takes notice of any alleged violations of *Dawn's* code of ethics, and informs the Editor for appropriate action.
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